



DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

INFORMATION SERVICE

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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BREEDING DUCKS CAUGHT BETWEEN DUST AND ICE

Millions of North America's waterfowl which have been forced out of their ancestral nesting grounds by prolonged drought are being prevented from attempting to find new nesting areas in Canada by an ice line which is breaking up unusually late this year, the Department of the Interior reports.

The result is that the waterfowl which were expected to nest and produce more birds for the hunters, and for posterity, are squeezed in between two natural enemies which they cannot overcome--dry land and dust at their rear, forbidding ice at their front.

Scrutiny of the reports of the annual nesting ground survey of breeding birds which the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife makes every May and early June, in cooperation with the Canadian Wildlife Service, Canadian Provinces, and northern States, substantiates earlier reports about the plight of a large segment of the continent's waterfowl.

In 1955, which was the peak of the good water years, the survey showed an estimated six and a quarter million potholes and ponds in the southern portions of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba, and in North Dakota. These ponds varied from a quarter of an acre in area to 10 or 15 miles in diameter. The survey crews this year estimate a decrease in these water areas of 68 percent, or a total number at present of just over two million.

Analysis of population estimates indicates that the total number of breeding birds is about the same or possibly some smaller than last year. But the mallard breeding population is estimated to be 19 percent below the 1958 figure; pintails are 11 percent below 1958 and considerably below previous years; the canvasback is down 36 percent below last year's figure.

Officials of the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife report that in other years when the waterfowl were forced to nest north of their usual haunts the results were invariably bad. Even during an early spring, when the birds had an opportunity to spread out and locate places to nest, the results were not good. Many of the birds did not seem able to adjust to the new type of terrain and made little or no effort to nest. Ducklings hatched late may not be able to fly at freeze-up, especially when the freeze-up comes early.

But even that meager chance of getting reasonable production is dwindling every day the ice holds the birds in concentrations and denies them the opportunity to make the best of the substitute habitat. The ice line in early June ran northwesterly from Winisk Lake in Ontario, past Lynn Lake in Manitoba and up toward Ft. Smith in the Northwest Territories.

The final survey of the year, to determine nesting success, begins in the early part of July. The results of that survey will bear considerable weight with Bureau officials charged with the responsibility of making recommendations to the Secretary of the Interior for fixing shooting days and bag limits for the fall season.

The May-June breeding population survey gives major emphasis to the Dakotas, Minnesota, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, western Ontario, Alaska, and the western portion of the Northwest Territories. Surveys are conducted also in about 20 other northern States. This is the most extensive wildlife survey conducted in the world. It covers over two and one-quarter million square miles of waterfowl nesting habitat and yields information which indicates trends in waterfowl population.

The methods of operation and analyses of the data insure reliability, the Service declared. The survey is made primarily by air, with eight planes manned by trained observers from the Bureau staff with the help of some from Canada, plus a number of planes and crews from the States. Ground crews study the ecology of the nesting area and establish the relationship between aerial observations and those made on the ground. The planes cover about 30,000 lineal miles during the project on preestablished routes over known nesting areas.

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